

BLM Study Review of Hells Canyon Complex Studies

Distribution and Abundance of Wintering Bald Eagles in Hells Canyon

Technical Report, Appendix E.3.2-16

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November 8, 2002

1. INTRODUCTION

Bald eagles winter in substantial numbers along the Hells Canyon reach of the Snake River and its associated reservoirs; they also use several large communal roosts in the area. Although this area is important for wintering bald eagles, little information is available on their distribution. The objectives of this study were to determine the numbers and distribution of wintering bald eagles in the Hells Canyon reach of the Snake River.

2. CONCLUSIONS

Annual aerial surveys were employed to count bald eagles during the winters of 1993 through 1998. Numbers, locations, and age classes (subadult and adult birds) were recorded. From 1993 through 1998, total bald eagle numbers average 102.5 (+/- 31.2STD) in the study area. The highest numbers were counted in 1994 (152 individuals) and the lowest in 1998 (68 individuals). Wintering bald eagle numbers did not show a significant trend over the study period. Bald eagles concentrated along Oxbow Reservoir and the Powder River Arm of Brownlee Reservoir rather than in the unimpounded reaches above Brownlee Reservoir and below Hells Canyon Dam.

Concentration areas appeared to have reliable food sources, such as fish, waterfowl, and winter-killed mule deer. Bald eagles seek wintering areas offering an abundant and readily available food supply with suitable night roosts, perching substrate, and overall low disturbance levels. Food supply associated with the reservoirs in the study area can be considered stable and probably plentiful. Perch sites are not considered to be limiting in the study area. In conclusion, key parameters that determine the use of the area by wintering bald eagles are met in the study area, and wintering bald eagles do not appear to be threatened.

3. STUDY ADEQUACY

The study is complete and meets research parameters. Overall, the study answers questions in regards to assessment of project impacts and development of Protection, Maintenance, and Enhancement measures. However, as noted in the study it can be expected that human activities (e.g., recreation) will increase in the area and there is a need to evaluate potential impacts of such in the area. Particularly, the potential

impacts from new and existing recreational facilities and the effects on preferred foraging areas, night roosts, and perching sites (e.g., McCormick Park and the Powder River Arm).

4. BLM CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

Upon reviewing the study it appears that habitat requirements of wintering bald eagles are met in the study area, and wintering bald eagles do not appear to be threatened. Spatial distribution appears to be driven by abundance of food, particularly carrion (e.g., mule deer), fish, and waterfowl. Additional information is needed in some key wintering areas in regards to human disturbance (e.g., recreational development).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Support is given to recommendation identified in the study, which include: (1) continue annual midwinter bald eagle counts; and (2) evaluate human disturbance effects on wintering bald eagles.